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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of job training or retraining and employment programs in response to high rates of unemployment in France has spurred interest in program evaluation to see what results have been achieved. The contribution of traditional standardized evaluations and of emerging methodologies is being examined. Traditional evaluation methods focus on postprogram return to employment. The standard methodology consists of quantitative statistical surveys. Two very different approaches can be distinguished: the first targets the situation of program leavers at a given date, and the second traces the path of a cohort of potential public policy beneficiaries over time. Whether derived from transversal or longitudinal evaluation methods, such observations are often related to standard, classic sociodemographic variables. The rates of return to employment after participation in a program, as well as the description of individual progress, show that there is no determinist relationship between participation in the programs and return to employment. Thus, these evaluations suggest a greater complexity of entry and reentry processes, which other approaches attempt to examine. Two such approaches can be identified--one based on the strategies used by the beneficiaries and the other analyzing the interactions between the agents of entry (local representatives of national agencies, local employment agencies, training organizations, and potential or real employers) and specific socioeconomic conditions. The methods for identifying these variables consist of non- or semidirective interviews with the participants. Better qualitative evaluation methods, coupled with quantitative approaches, are needed. (KC)

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TRAINING & EMPLOYMENT

FRENCH DIMENSIONS

NEWSLETTER FROM CEREQ AND ITS ASSOCIATED CENTRES

No 11
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Evaluation of Public Policies on Employment:
Issues, Tools and Methods

THE employment situation in France has suffered sharp and continuing decline since the middle of the 1970s. This overall scarcity of employment has been accompanied, however, by more specific problems: young people entering the labour market are particularly vulnerable, and long-term unemployment is excluding greater and greater portions of the workforce (women and low-skilled workers) from the job market. The 1980s saw the development of multiple large-scale public interventions aimed at remedying this situation. Because of their cost on the one hand and the persistence of unemployment on the other, there has been growing interest in the evaluations of such policies. Predominantly statistical, these tools have become increasingly refined and diversified.

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UNEMPLOYMENT AND PUBLIC POLICIES: THE ISSUES OF EVALUATION

UNEMPLOYMENT has been growing at a steady rate for several years, generally around 10 percent; in March 1993, it hit the three-million mark. Various forms of selectivity have accompanied this overall scarcity of employment and have become increasingly pronounced. The phenomena are interrelated, but two very marked trends should be singled out. Young people under twenty-five years of age are, relative to other economically active categories, the most vulnerable to

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unemployment. Their unemployment rate remains well above that of the national average, despite a certain reduction in the differential over the past ten years (19.7 % versus 6.5 % in 1982; 19.1 % versus 10.2 % in December 1992, taking seasonal variations into account). The period of transition from school to work has become longer, particularly for those young people with the lowest degrees. It has also become more complicated, notably with the increase in precarious forms of employment and the implementation of successive programmes for post-secondary alternating training. Along with the rise of long-term unemployment (more than one year), the risks of occupational and social exclusion have increased. The rate of those unemployed for one year or more has gone from 12.8 percent in December 1975 to 24.7 percent in December 1982 and to 31.7 percent in December 1992.

Young people and the long-term unemployed have thus become the privileged targets of public policies. Over the past few years, nearly 800,000 young people and 300,000 to 400,000 long-term unemployed have entered assistance programmes for job entry or re-entry each year. The rapid revision and the diversity of the programmes, which offer varying proportions of training courses, subsidies for hiring (jobs that are "subsidized" for fixed or indefinite periods) and activities in the noncommercial sector, attest to both the significant difficulties in finding solutions to unemployment and a constant effort to improve the effectiveness of the measures. The scale of public interventions coupled with the persistence of unemployment explain the growing interest in evaluating the effects of the programmes on beneficiaries.

In proposing a preliminary analysis of the tools and methods used for evaluating the effectiveness of these public programmes, this article addresses two main issues: the contribution of traditional standardised evaluations and that of newly emerging methodological trends.

An Inventory of Methodologies

In the context of its participation in the Technical Support Group set up by the Ministry of Labour's European Social Fund Mission, CEREQ undertook an initial exploration of this field through the analysis of some sixty evaluations carried out in France between 1989 and 1992 and dealing with measures related to the European Social Fund's objectives 3 and 4 (unemployed young people and long-term unemployed). This study followed a collaboration with the European Social Fund itself, within a working group that elaborated a European methodology for ex-post evaluation of jointly funded activities. [See Bibliography.]

A TRADITIONAL EVALUATION: STATISTICAL DESCRIPTION OF BENEFICIARIES' EVOLUTION

THESE evaluations focus on the post-programme return to employment. The standard methodology consists of quantitative statistical surveys. Two very different approaches can be distinguished: the first targets the situation of programme-leavers at a given date, while the second retraces the path of a cohort of potential public-policy beneficiaries over time.

▮ *Measuring the Entry Rate*

The first option describes the evolution of beneficiaries of one or several measures on the basis of a single, selective observation. The methodological tool is generally a survey of the individuals involved, carried out three to six months after they leave the programme to be evaluated. This is the oldest form of evaluation, and it is envisioned at the outset of every new measure. In France, it comes out of a tradition of counting and follow-up of beneficiaries that was set up by the administration and has since become a legal requirement. The government sees this as a means of guiding the activities undertaken on the basis of simple, homogeneous, standardised information. The results often come from the analysis of the individual follow-up sheets that the administration requires from training providers. The rate of return to employment, sometimes interpreted in terms of placement rate, is often considered the strategic indicator that sums up the effectiveness of the measures.

This kind of evaluation encompasses a greater variety of situations or positions occupied at the date of the inquiry (unemployment, training course, inactivity, stable employment, precarious employment, subsidised employment, etc.). On this basis it is possible to make more detailed comparisons of the specific effects of each measure--traineeship, for example, generally seems to be less effective than sandwich training. Similarly, the evolution of those leaving a given programme can be studied in terms of their social characteristics: sex, age, qualification, training level, etc. The point, therefore, is to evaluate the degree to which public assistance policies for entry and re-entry compensate, reinforce or have no effect on the mechanisms of selectivity at work on the labour market.

These methods of intermittent observation have one limitation. The proportion of beneficiaries obtaining a job at the end of six months cannot be considered stable because the jobs obtained are often precarious. In addition, the results depend directly on the moment chosen to carry out the observation. Thus this approach is complemented by longitudinal analyses taking the time variable into account.

▮ *Measuring the Impact of Programmes on Individual Trajectories*

In France, longitudinal evaluation methods were first used to measure the effectiveness of the academic tracks of the initial training system. They have now been applied to the evaluation of public policies in the struggle against unemployment. These evaluations consist of a fairly long follow-up (3 to 5 years) of a cohort of individuals (young people or the long-term unemployed) involved in processes of mobility on the labour market. They are thus massive and expensive to implement. They rely on retrospective interviews or on the panel approach (several interviews of the same people over time). Periods in the public employment programmes are thus seen as so many steps in career patterns, and their effects are observed over time rather than instantaneously, at a precise date.

These longitudinal approaches have allowed the identification of typologies for entry paths. It has been possible to test whether the periods in the programmes (or their absence) significantly modify the career patterns. These analyses provide a context for interpreting the role of public measures in terms of direct effect or effectiveness per se. They emphasise that the links between public policies and access to

employment cannot be reduced to a direct mechanical relationship but depend instead on adjustments repeated over time, as the behaviours of the young people and the firms' choices are shaped and reorganised.

Differences in Integration Itineraries

An inquiry carried out by CEREQ on a sample group of young people who left secondary education in 1986 studied their career patterns over three and a half years. Three kinds of evolutions were identified, with entry programmes assuming different significance and functions in each case:

(1) A process of entry into working life that is stable or in the process of becoming stable. Here, potential initial problems were resolved by a moderate recourse to the programmes (50.9 % of young men and 60.2 % of young women).

(2) An evolution marked by an intensive period in the programmes. Such programmes are mainly oriented to overcoming the major obstacles to job access (18.4 % of young men and 22.3 % of young women).

(3) An evolution where unemployment is dominant. There are frequent periods in programmes, but these neither resolve the intense difficulties of entry into working life nor rule out the danger of exclusion (12.5 % of young men and 17.6 % of young women).

[18.4 % of the young men were not included in the statistical data because they had been out of military service less than six months at the time of the inquiry.]

In addition, the creation of the cohorts on the basis of criteria independent of the public policies (e.g., all the young people leaving school in a given year, or all the individuals becoming unemployed in a given month) brings out certain effects of the programmes which had previously been overshadowed. It is possible to evaluate the proportion of individuals in a cohort affected by public policies, to measure the selectivity of the programmes by comparing profiles of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and to identify the phases of the evolutions corresponding to the periods in programmes, etc.

A Panel Study

For a number of years CEREQ has also been seeking to improve knowledge of the role and significance of public programmes of assistance for youth entry into working life relative to the transition from school to work. These evaluations are carried out in the framework of the National Observatory on Entry into Working Life (see Training and Employment *no. 3), which involves three operations: the decentralised entry survey; national inquiries on career paths, and specialized investigations. Among the last, the one that is most specifically aimed at the evaluation of the effect of measures is the* **telephone panel** *on "public measures for the training and labour-market entry of young people", which was set up in 1987. This permits follow-up on two cohorts of young people who left secondary school before the baccalauréat (in 1986 and 1989) and apprenticeship (in 1989). A first telephone survey of the second cohort took place eighteen months after the interruption of studies. At present, three series of retrospective inquiries have been conducted (in December 1990, 1991 and 1992). A fourth inquiry is envisaged for December 1993 and will be accompanied by the survey of a representative sampling of various non-respondants from the previous series. The panel study of this second cohort is part of a group of studies sponsored by the Ministry of Labour with the participation of various of CEREQ's institutional partners. It has served as the base sample for studies centred on one or another specific programmes and conducted by these partners (DARES, delegation on employment, delegation on vocational training).*

Whether derived from transversal or longitudinal evaluation methods, observations are often related to standard, classic socio-demographic variables. Young people are above all characterised by their level of schooling (and thus their academic difficulties), and the long-term unemployed by their level of qualification, their sex or their age (thus, factors of employability). These categorisations are based implicitly on a mechanistic conception of the role of public policies: the idea is to make up for a deficiency or a well-identified lack that prevents or delays employment. For young people, the deficiencies are situated on the level of training; for the long-term unemployed, on the more undefined level of employability. In fact, the rates of return to employment after participation in a programme, as well as the description of individual evolutions, show that there is no determinist relationship between participation in the programmes and return to employment. Thus these evaluations suggest a greater complexity of entry and re-entry processes, and this is what other approaches attempt to examine.

REFINEMENT OF EVALUATION APPROACHES: STRATEGIES AND LOCAL ECONOMIC CONTEXT

For several years various attempts have been made to diversify the nature of the explanatory variables. Two of them can be singled out: one based on the strategies of the beneficiaries and another analysing, on the local level, the institutional interactions between the agents of entry (local representation of national ministries, local employment agency, training organisations and potential or real employers) and specific socio-economic conditions.

The methods for identifying these variables are still rudimentary. They consist of non- or semi-directive interviews with the various interlocutors involved, often on a very local level.

▮ *Beneficiaries' Strategies*

Certain evaluations analyse the representations (of self, situation, environment), behaviours and strategies of the individuals involved and show that they react to the measures as players belonging to the social space of entry into working life. This approach leads to not limiting the evaluation to the direct "employment effects" that are usually considered the best indicators of success. The effects of participation in programmes on the beneficiaries' personal development are sometimes analysed as the most relevant dimension. A great importance is attached to renewing the energy of the individual, for example (but not necessarily), around the formulation and development of a career plan. The idea of the "travelled path" (development of autonomy, know-how, the ability to elaborate life projects, savoir-faire) thus becomes as important as entry into working life in the narrow sense.

The evaluations analyse how the participation in public employment programmes falls subjectively and strategically within the framework of individual evolutions. They seek to understand, for example, the motivations for accepting, and above all, for refusing, to enter public programmes. The underlying meaning of these motivations is sought in a life history, a specific sociological and economic context, in attitudes of

adaptation (opportunities seized) or of projection into the future.

The Contextual Approach: Locally-Based Programmes

Taking into account interactions on the local level during the implementation of a programme and its operational procedures brings out the potential brakes on the success of such implementation: the degree of motivation of one institutional partner or another (essentially the employers in the case of the long-term unemployed), suspiciousness or rivalry among institutions, dependency of one player in relation to the others (more specifically the training organisms in relation to their contracting agencies). The quality of the implementation of activities is likewise evaluated: procedures of invitation to tender for the carrying out of training activities, the contractual process, criteria for identifying and choosing publics, etc.

Local Economic Conditions

Every programme is implemented in a localised context, characterised by socio-economic structures and processes and the particular dynamics of the labour market. These contextual elements determine more or less intensely both the impact of the measures on their beneficiaries and the carrying out of training and entry activities on the local level (specific local characteristics of the population involved, local structure of training supply, needs of local businesses, etc.).

At present, however, the extent to which these socio-economic data are taken into account in the analysis of programme effects remains limited. Only a few evaluation projects attempt to place their results in perspective with the characteristics of the local economy: growth rate and changing employment, rate and structure of unemployment, specific features of economic activities. Because it is very mobile, the short-run economic situation has to be incorporated from the very conception of the entire observation and not simply injected as a last resort at the time of the statistical evaluations.

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The standardised quantitative tools (sample groups, retrospective surveys) have attained a technical level that allows them maximum operation. At the same time, the new, qualitative monographic analyses that take into account explanatory variables going beyond socio-demographic indicators are beginning to proliferate in Europe. The next methodological challenge is to articulate these two levels and reduce the rupture between quantitative and qualitative, macro- and microeconomic, longitudinal and synchronic, structural and biographical approaches. A greater formalisation of qualitative investigations is certainly a necessary first step, and CEREQ has made this its goal, through, among others, a study of the impact of the local environment on conditions of entry into working life among young people.

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(Translation by Miriam Rosen)

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